学苑・英語コミュニケーション紀要　No. 834　38〜44（2010・4）

Robert Burns and Freemasonry

James Godley

Abstract

In this paper I would like to bring to the reader's attention two generally neglected aspects of the legacy Robert Burns left behind. Firstly, few books on Burns even mention the fact that he was a Freemason. His involvement in speculative Masonry, which began to spread rapidly through Britain and across the Continent during the eighteenth century, colored much of Burns's intellectual perspective. The objectivity, the wit, the satirical view of religion, and the absence of effusiveness over nature we see in many of his poems, show clearly that he was a part of the Age of Enlightenment. Masonry with its emphasis on humanism and neo-Platonic thought was also a product of that age. In a paper of this scope it is not possible to go into the roots of Masonry in detail. That would require a whole book. This essay only intends to stimulate the reader's curiosity on Burns and Masonry.

In the second part, I introduce the reader to the fact that Burns did much for the preservation of Scottish folk songs. Burns wrote hundreds of them. This is another area of his work that few people are even aware of. In Japan, for example, almost no one knows that Burns was the composer of *Auld Lang Syne*—better known there as *Hotaru no Hikari*.

PART I　Burns's Masonic Poems

Robert Burns's well-known poems such as *Oh, My Luve's Like a Red, Red Rose, To a Mouse, Tam o' Shanter,* and *Auld Lang Syne* are standard anthology pieces today. Burns is generally classified as a romantic. The sentimental image of Burns as "the plowboy poet" still clings to him even to this day. But the truth is that he was much closer intellectually to the eighteenth century than to the nineteenth century Romantics. He was to some degree a product of the age of reason, also called the Age of Enlightenment.

The general public does not know that Burns was a Mason. Scholars rarely discuss his Masonic poems.

Let us take a look at three of Burn's Masonic poems. The first is *The Farewell. To the Brethren of St. Jame's Lodge, Tarbolton* (pp. 217–18) written in 1786.

The poems are cited from *Burns, Poems and Songs* (1970) and the glosses are mine.

Burns in his Master Mason's Apron
Copied from Marie Roberts, 1986.

The Farewell. To the Brethren of St. James's Lodge, Tarbolton

Tune, Goodnight and joy be wi' you a'

I

ADIEU! a heart-warm, fond adieu!
Dear brothers of the *mystic tye*!
Ye favour'd, ye enlighten'd Few,
Companions of my social joy!
Tho' I to foreign lands must hie, — hie=go
Pursuing Fortune's slidd'ry ba', — slidd'ry ba'=slippery ball
With melting heart, and brimful eye,
I'll mind you still, tho' far awa'. — awa'=away

II

Oft have I met your social Band,
And spent the chearful, festive night;
Oft, honor'd with supreme command,
Presided o'er the *Sons of light*:
And by that *Hieroglyphic* bright,
Which none but *Craftsmen* ever saw!
Strong Mem'ry on my heart shall write
Those happy scenes when far awa'!

III

May Freedom, Harmony and Love
Unite you in the *grand Design*,
Beneath th' Omniscient Eye above,
The glorious ARCHITECT Divine!
That you may keep th' *unerring line*,
Still rising by the *plummet's law*,
Till *Order* bright, completely shine,
Shall be my Pray'r when far awa'.

IV

And *YOU*, farewell! whose merits claim, — *YOU*=William Wallace
Justly that *highest badge* to wear!
Heav'n bless your honor'd, noble Name,
To MASONRY and SCOTIA dear!
A last request, permit me here,
When yearly ye assemble a', — a'=all
One *round*, I ask it with a *tear*,
To him, *the Bard, that's far awa*'. — *Bard*= the poet

Burns was twenty-five years old when he became the deputy master of the St. James's Lodge in Tarbolton. When he wrote this poem, he was planning to immigrate to Jamaica to escape from a situation which he had found intolerable. He was deeply in debt, and his lover, Jean Armour, was about to give birth to their illegitimate twins. For this, Burns had been condemned by the Presbyterian Church, and had been ordered to stand on the scaffold with his lover to endure public condemnation. He wanted to marry Jean Armour, but because his fiancé's father disapproved of him as a suitor, he was unable to do so. In Jamaica he was planning to work as a bookkeeper on a plantation. When he wrote this poem, all of his arrangements had been made for the trip. The grand master of the lodge, Major-General James Montgomery, was often absent from his position. This left Burns in charge as the deputy master of the lodge. Often in Scotland at that time, aristocrats were masters of lodges but did not attend meetings. This is why he talks about him being in "supreme command" and "presiding over the *Sons of light*".

In the last stanza, Burns mentions a person wearing the highest badge. He is referring to William Wallace, the sheriff of Ayr and the Grand Master-Mason of Scotland:

> And *YOU*, farewell! whose merits claim,
> Justly that *highest badge* to wear!

In Jamaica, as he mentions in the poem, he will remember his brothers through the Masonic symbols of the compass and the square, which he refers to as that "hieroglyphic bright, which none but the craftsmen ever saw!" And he asks his lodge brothers to follow the plummet's "*unerring line*", that is to obey the moral laws of the universe. According to Masonic principles, God, the grand Architect, measured the universe at the time of its creation with craftsman's working tools. The square, compass, and plumb are three major symbols in Freemasonry. Light is central to the Masonic initiation ceremony. It is a primary symbol for reason. Freemasons, many of whom were also deists, were influenced by Descartes, Locke and others. Although Locke was not a deist himself, his ideas paved the way for the deist philosophers who wished not to depend solely on the authority of the church but on one's inner light as well. (It is interesting to note that Masons even today have the letter G on the wall of each lodge. G stands for both God and for geometry, God being the eternal geometer.) Descartes, Leibnitz, Pascal, and Newton were all mathematicians, and their work led to a new interest in and reverence for the principles and laws governing the creation, not only for the Creator (the divine Builder Himself). It was Newton who had discovered the 'architectural laws' of the universe. Masons too held mathematics, especially geometry, in high esteem. Geometry is mentioned repeatedly in the initiation ceremonies for the degrees. In the second degree master's lecture there is also mention of paying "*rational* homage to Deity".

Masonic symbol

The next poem I would like to discuss, *The Sons of old Killie*, was written just before Burns left for the Kilmarnock Lodge in Edinburgh in 1786. Since he had become suddenly famous when the first volume of his poems was published, he cancelled his plans to immigrate.

Burns had been made an honorary member of Kilmarnock Lodge. In the 18th century, masons in England and Scotland regularly held their meetings at inns in a private room usually on the second floor. For this reason food and drink often followed their meetings. *The Sons of old Killie* (p. 241) was a drinking song which Burns sang at a party at the Commercial Inn in honor of his honorary membership.

The Sons of old Killie

Tune—Shawnboy

YE sons of old Killie, assembled by Willie,
To follow the noble vocation;
Your thrifty old mother has scarce such another
To sit in that honoured station.
I've little to say, but only to pray,
As praying's the ton of your fashion; ton=mode, style
A prayer from the muse you well may excuse, muse=goddess of the arts
'Tis seldom her favourite passion.

Ye powers who preside o'er the wind and the tide, (i.e., earth, fire, water, air)
Who marked each element's border;
Who formed this frame with beneficent aim,
Whose sovereign statute is order;
Within this dear mansion may wayward contention
Or withered envy ne'er enter;
May secresy round be the mystical bound,
And brotherly love be the centre.

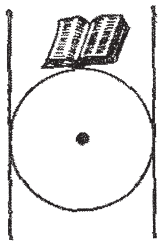
"Willie", mentioned in the first line, was William Parker, the master of the lodge. Referring to the members as sons, of course, reflects the idea of Mason's as "widow's sons", which refers back to Hiram Abif, the legendary first mason and superintendent of King Solomon's temple who was murdered by ambitious, greedy subordinates. There's family imagery in this poem: the lodge is the thrifty old mother, and the members are all her sons and brothers:

May secrecy round be the mystical bound,
And brotherly love be the center.

The wayward contention that he mentions in the last part probably refers to the split in the Tarbolton lodge in 1773. There was at that time a conflict between the *Antients* (ancients)

and the *Moderns*. The *Antients* wanted to keep the old Christian traditions alive and include the Saints' Days in their calendar as they had in the 16th century, whereas the *Moderns* were more influenced by contemporary thought (the Age of Enlightenment, belief in reason, etc.) and wanted to cut them out. When the lodge split, Burns was on the side of the ancients, and therefore joined their faction.

"The powers that preside" over the wind and tide mentioned in the last part refers to a concept that dates back to Empedocles and ancient Greek philosophy, the idea of the four elements: earth, fire, water, and air. This poem reflects the eighteenth century interest in classical humanism, which was also an aspect of Freemasonry. The four elements were also important aspects of alchemy (changing base metals into gold) in which there was still widespread interest at the time. The spiritual dimension of alchemy was the process of spiritual purification which was also a goal of Freemasons and is part of the "mystical bond" that Burns is talking about in the next to the last line. The circle is one of the oldest symbols for deity, the sun, and time. It is also part of an important Masonic symbol with multiple levels. In masonry it consists of two vertical parallel lines on each side of a circle with a point at the circle's center. There is a Bible on top of the circle. This symbol suggests keeping one's desires and passions within proper bounds.



Another Masonic symbol
The point in the circle

In the last Masonic poem I would like to consider, '*To Dr. John Mackenzie*' (p. 216), Burns is addressing a fellow lodge member and a good friend.

FRIDAY first's the day appointed
By our Right Worshipful Anointed,
To hold our grand Procession,
To get a blade o' Johnie's Morals, — blade=piece, specimen
And taste a swatch o' Manson's barrels, — swatch=sample
I' the way of our Profession:
Our Master and the Brotherhood
Wad a' be glad to see you;
For me, I wad be mair than proud — mair=more
To share the MERCIES wi' you.
If Death then wi' skaith then — skaith=harm
Some mortal heart is hechtin, — hechtin=promising, offering
Inform him, an' storm him, — storm=rage at
That SATURDAY ye'll fecht him.

"Manson's" barrels, I assume, is a reference to the name of the owner of the inn in which they were to hold their meeting after the procession. Burns was inviting Dr. Mackenzie,

a Masonic friend from Mauchline, to their annual procession which was held on June 24th, also called Midsummer Day. This is an ironic, humorous poem. The poet asks the doctor to beg death to postpone snatching away a patient until Saturday, the day after the Masonic procession and drinking party so that the doctor can take part in the festivities.

Since Burns would be marching with other masons in a parade and wearing Masonic regalia, we know that his masonic membership was not something that he kept a secret. The mason's parades had been banned by the Grand Lodge in 1747. And in 1754 there was another regulation forbidding masons from dressing in regalia in public. But the *Antients* did not forbid parades until 1799. And as I mentioned above, Burns gave his allegiance to the *Antients*. Parading was one of the many issues that divided the *Moderns* and the *Antients*. At this time also Burns was *Deputy* (ie. appointed) *Master* and it was, I assume, his duty to give out the invitations.

PART II Burns's Contribution to the Preservation of Scottish Songs

In the late eighteenth century James Johnson was collecting Scottish songs in an anthology called the *Scots musical museum*. In 1787 he approached Burns to ask for his help in this work, and soon Burns was virtually in charge the whole project. Then, in 1792 Burns was approached by George Thompson to help him with another collection, *Select Scottish Airs*. Burns soon became the editor in charge of this collection also. Burns became so involved in these two works that he devoted himself to them for the rest of his life. Neither editor, Johnson or Thompson, could have anticipated the excitement with which Burns fulfilled his commission. Burns was idealistic. He refused to take money for his contributions nor does his name even appear in either of the collections.

In his enthusiasm Burns set about collecting fragments of folk songs that existed in Scotland at that time consisting sometimes only of verse, or perhaps a partial chorus, and made them into complete songs. He wrote new songs for melodies which had lost their words, his own original lyrics based on fragmentary models. He collected songs from fishing folks and from farmers. At the time Burns was working at a government position in which he was required to travel along the coast of Scotland to spy on bookleggers who were secretly exporting Scotch whiskey. In his travels he picked up lore about local places. There were patriotic songs, soldier's songs, drinking songs. *Auld Lang Syne*, the Scottish song about friendship, is loved even today all over the world. This song too was written mostly by Burns though in his modesty he never claimed credit for it. It is no exaggeration to say that Robert Burns, more than anyone else, was responsible for the recreation and preservation of the entire body of Scottish songs. He did all this, not for personal glory, but for Scotland. This is a fact of literary history that not only the general public but even most students of literature are unaware of.

Critics have traditionally classified Burns as one of the early romantic poets, the peasant poet writing of the ordinary experiences of humble life. That was the aspect of his poetry that was to appeal to Wordsworth and others. Yet basically his sentiments were not romantic in the tradition of Keats or Shelley whose works often tended to be transcendental or based on an abstract theme. (For example, Keats's, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever"; Shelley's, "Oh, wild West Wind, thou breath of Autumn's being".) There is something grand about much of the poetry of Keats and Shelley. Burns, by contrast, was the heir of anonymous Scottish ballad writers in the old folk tradition. His love songs are the opposite of the love poems of Shelley. There is no philosophizing, no platonic ideas. They tell the truth about human feelings without any distortion and in a simple way. One thinks of such songs as *Ye banks and braes o' bonie Doon* or *The lovely lass o' Inverness*. Burns was fond of using local names and places as, for example, in the following *Song —Sic a wife as Willie's wife* (p. 509, italics mine):

WILLIE Wastle dwalls on Tweed,
The spot they ca' it Linkumdoddie;
...
He has a wife that 's dour and din, dour=sullen, harsh; din=dark
Tinkler Madgie was her mither; tinkler=pot mender; or low rascal
Sic a wife as Willie's wife,
I wadna gie a button for her.—

Many of his poems and songs were linked to the ordinary daily life in agricultural Scotland. They are simple and down-to-earth.

He continued to collect and rewrite songs and create new ones devoting most of his energy to this work for the rest of his life. We will never know what legacy he might have left behind had he not died at the age of thirty-six.

Bibliography

Burns, Poems and Songs. James Kinsley, editor. Oxford University Press, 1970.
British Poets and Secret Societies. Marie Roberts, Croom Helm, 1986.
Robert Burns and His World. David Daiches, Jarrold and Sons, 1971.

（ジェイムズ・ゴッドリー　　英語コミュニケーション学科）